

NATURE DOES NOT YET SAY NO TO INNER AWARENESS: REPLY TO STOLJAR

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One of the major divides in contemporary philosophy of consciousness is on whether phenomenal consciousness requires some form of self-consciousness. The disagreement revolves around the following principle (or something in the vicinity):

L4: For any subject *S* and phenomenally conscious mental state *C* of *S*, *C* is phenomenally conscious only if *S* is aware of *C*.

We may call the relevant awareness of one's own mental states "inner awareness" and the principle "Inner Awareness Principle" (IA). First-order representationalist theories of consciousness (Dretske 1995; Tye 1995) reject IA, whereas meta-representationalist theories—higher-order representationalism (Lycan 1996; Rosenthal 1997) and self-representationalism (Kriegel 2009)—and some "acquaintance" theories (Coleman 2015; Williford 2015) have it at the core of their account of phenomenal consciousness. IA is often taken for granted by its advocates or supported just by phenomenological considerations (Zahavi 2005; Kriegel 2009). IA detractors too, however, claim phenomenology on their side—by appeal to the "transparency" of experience (Harman 1990; Tye 2002). Given such introspective disagreement, the quarrel needs to be settled on theoretical, and not just purely phenomenological, grounds.

In a paper recently published in this Journal, Daniel Stoljar (2021) gives a substantial boost to the debate by putting forward a massive theoretical criticism of IA. He addresses many extant arguments for IA, and argues, for each of them, that it is unpersuasive. His challenge is important and, arguably, a needed one. But it also offers IA advocates an opportunity to defend their principle.

My criticism of Stoljar's arguments will rely on the same assumptions as his, even though with some of them I am not fully on board.¹ In particular, I do not think that his formulation of IA (what he calls the *inner awareness theory of consciousness*) is the most charitable. He characterizes IA thus:

S is in a conscious state (phenomenal sense) *C* only if *S* is aware (phenomenal sense) of a state of affairs, viz., *S*'s being in *C*. (2021: 4)

Note, however, that Stoljar's formulation is different from the one I used to introduce IA—the latter is somewhat weaker—in at least two respects. First, Stoljar construes inner awareness as *phenomenal*. This, arguably, implies that inner awareness is *phenomenally manifest*, i.e., it shows up in the phenomenology of one's experience. An immediate worry for this version of IA is looming infinite regress: if inner awareness is phenomenally manifest, then it must consist of a *phenomenally conscious* state (i.e., a *second-order* conscious state directed at *C*); but if so, then, according to IA, *S* must *also* be phenomenally aware of this second-order state, by being in a *third-order* phenomenally conscious state. It's clear how this may lead to an infinite regress. Different theorists have proposed different ways to stop the regress. Some have construed the mental state in virtue of which *S* is innerly aware of *C* as *unconscious*: on *higher-order thought* theories, *S* is innerly aware of *C* in virtue of having an unconscious thought directed at *C* (Rosenthal

¹ My disagreement on those assumptions, however, will not play a role in my criticism of his arguments.

1997); on *higher-order perception* theories, S is innerly aware of C in virtue of having an unconscious perceptual state directed at C (Lycan 1996). On these views, inner awareness is *not* phenomenally manifest—it is not *phenomenal* awareness. Others have defended the view that inner awareness *is* phenomenally manifest and does consist of a *conscious* state, but one which is not distinct from C; this stops the regress because inner awareness is not higher-order, but same-order. Roughly, on this view, in virtue of being in C, S is aware both of a worldly object (and its properties) and of C itself (Kriegel 2009).² So, inner awareness theorists have put forward different proposals to overcome the infinite-regress threat. On some of those proposals, inner awareness is *not* phenomenal. Therefore, IA should be construed as neutral in this respect. Stoljar (2021: 3-4) claims his formulation of IA to be neutral as to whether inner awareness is construed as “cognitive,” “perceptual,” or “phenomenal,” where, arguably, cognitive and perceptual awareness may be construed as non-phenomenal.³ The characterization of IA he decides to work with, however, construes inner awareness as phenomenal and is thereby *not* neutral, apparently ruling out at least two eminent theories of inner awareness—i.e., higher-order thought and higher-order perception theories.⁴ In what follows, I will stick to the neutral formulation (announced by Stoljar himself).

Second, my formulation of IA only requires that S be aware of the *mental state C*, rather than the *state of affairs of S's being in C*. Unlike Stoljar's, my characterization does not imply indexical reference to the subject. I will nonetheless ignore this difference in what follows and play on Stoljar's grounds in this respect:

LA_{ref}: For any subject S and phenomenally conscious state C of S, C is phenomenally conscious only if S is aware of being in C.

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Stoljar analyzes ten arguments for IA. Many of them, however, have *not* been put forward by IA advocates. Stoljar himself attributes to extant written philosophical work only three arguments out of ten—the other seven are at most *inspired by* some claim made by some IA defender (but not used by them as an *argument* for IA). Indeed, some of the arguments considered by Stoljar are poor and unconvincing—it is thus unsurprising that they have not been appealed to by IA advocates.⁵

² See also Williford (2019), who shows how a self-acquaintance view of consciousness can overcome the infinite-regress problem.

³ Where: “S is (cognitively) aware of a's being F iff S knows (or believes) that a is F.” “S is (perceptually) aware of a's being F iff S perceives (e.g. via the senses) a's being F.” “S is (phenomenally) aware of a's being F iff (a) S is aware of a's being F and (b) it is possible that S is not (cognitively) aware of a's being F and is not (perceptually) aware of a's being F.” (2021: 3-4).

⁴ Stoljar characterizes “phenomenal awareness” only negatively (i.e., as awareness that is neither cognitive nor perceptual; cf. fn. 3) without offering any positive construal of it. Thus, it may be that the notion at work in his argument does *not* imply that phenomenal awareness is conscious and thereby phenomenally manifest. If by “phenomenal awareness” Stoljar means a notion that entails “possibly *unconscious* awareness,” then his notion of phenomenal awareness is indeed compatible with higher-order thought and higher-order perception theories. However, although some authors maintain that there can be unconscious phenomenology (Rosenthal 2005; Carruthers 2005), this is arguably not the orthodox view and indeed most philosophers seem to agree that phenomenal awareness is always conscious and phenomenally manifest. For this reason, the more neutral formulation of IA I propose in the main text is preferable. At any rate, neither Stoljar's arguments nor my criticism of them rely on a specific characterization of “phenomenal awareness.”

⁵ The argument from *transitivity* and the related *reductio* argument (number 3 and 4 respectively in Stoljar's list), for example, are manifestly question-begging. Here is the *argument from transitivity* (Stoljar 2021: 8):

P1. I am in a (phenomenally) conscious state C iff I am conscious *of* my being in C.

In what follows, I will focus on what strike me as the two most compelling arguments in Stoljar’s list: the *argument from memory* and the *argument from attention*.⁶ As I will show, Stoljar’s objections to them can be rebutted and they promise to constitute the steadiest theoretical ground for IA.

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The *argument from memory* is among those, in Stoljar’s list, which have actually been appealed to by IA defenders. Indeed, the argument has a long history: it was originally put forward by the 5th-6th century Buddhist philosopher Dignāga and discussed extensively within the Buddhist tradition. More recently, it has been developed and refined by Buddhist scholars (Ganeri 1999; Perrett 2003; Kellner 2010; Thompson 2011). It has received less attention than it would deserve by analytic philosophy of mind IA advocates, one exception being Uriah Kriegel (2019), who has rigorously reconstructed and defended it.

The memory argument is based on the following intuitive ideas (which are shared by all the abovementioned reconstructions): (1) for any of our conscious experiences, we can recall it at some time after its occurrence; however, (2) we can only recall something if, at the time of its occurrence, we were *aware* of it; therefore, for any of our conscious experiences, we are aware of it at the time of its occurrence.

Stoljar’s reconstruction of the argument relies on somewhat different grounds and is developed through a more indirect route. It starts from the following observation. Suppose I now remember that yesterday I saw the blue sky. “Remembering” is here used factively; accordingly, my remembering implies that I now know that I saw the blue sky yesterday. Now, something must ground my current state of knowing. Stoljar outlines two models for such epistemic grounding. One is what he calls the “knowledge model:”

I remember that I saw the blue sky yesterday just in case (a) I currently know that I saw the blue sky yesterday; (b) yesterday I knew that I saw the blue sky; and (c) my current state of knowledge depends in the right way on my previous state of knowledge. (2021: 12)

However, this model is not applicable if yesterday I did not know that I was seeing the blue sky—say, because I did not notice that I was. Therefore, Stoljar’s reconstruction goes, the only option left is the “inner awareness model:”

I remember that I saw the blue sky yesterday just in case (a) I currently know that I saw it yesterday; (b) yesterday I was (phenomenally) aware of seeing it [...]; and (c) my current state of knowledge depends in the right way on my previous state of inner awareness. How does my current state of knowledge depend on my previous state of awareness? Here I think the suggestion is that my current

P2. I am conscious of my being in C iff I am aware (in some way) of my being in C.
C. Ergo, I am in a conscious state C only if I am aware (in some way) of my being in C.

Arguably, P1 of this argument directly entails IA. Similar considerations apply to the *reductio argument* (Stoljar 2021: 9):

[S]uppose (a) I am in conscious state C and (b) I am not aware (in any way) of my being in C [...]:
P1. If I am not aware (in any way) of my being in C, then C is not a conscious state.
C1. Ergo, C is not a conscious state (from P1 and (b))
P2. But C is a conscious state (from a).
C2 Ergo, C both is a conscious state and is not a conscious state. Contradiction.

As noted by Stoljar himself, here P1 is just the contrapositive of IA.

⁶ There are some other arguments in Stoljar’s list that I think could be convincing if properly developed. However, due to space constraints, I focus on the two that strike me as most compelling.

state of knowledge depends on the fact that I am currently (phenomenally) aware of *having seen* the blue sky yesterday, and this state of awareness is connected in the right way to the fact that yesterday I was (phenomenally) aware of my seeing the sky. (*ibid.*)

Here is how I understand his reconstruction of the memory argument:

P1. I remember that I saw the blue sky yesterday.

P2. If I remember that I saw the blue sky yesterday, I know that I saw the blue sky yesterday.

P3. I know that I saw the blue sky yesterday only if either (i) yesterday I knew that I was seeing the blue sky, or (ii) yesterday I was innerly aware of seeing the blue sky.

P4. Not (i).

C. (ii)

Stoljar's objection targets P3. He suggests that the "knowledge model" and the "inner awareness model" do not exhaust the relevant options and proposes a third model—what he calls the "perceptual model:"

I remember that I saw the blue sky yesterday just in case (a) I know that I saw the sky yesterday; (b) yesterday I saw the sky, and so was perceptually aware of the sky's being blue; and (c) my current state of knowledge depends on my previous perceptual state. How does my current state of knowledge depend on my previous perceptual state? The answer is that my current state of knowledge depends on a current state of perceptual awareness, according to which the sky *was* blue yesterday, and this state in turn bears the right relation to the state of perceptual awareness I was in yesterday when I saw the sky. (2021: 12-13)

Stoljar argues that his "perceptual model" is superior to the "inner awareness model" based on theoretical economy considerations: it has the same amount of explanatory power but does not entail the existence, let alone ubiquity, of inner awareness.

There are several issues with Stoljar's criticism. First, his "perceptual model" is antecedently implausible. For it is unclear what "being *perceptually* aware of the sky's *having been* blue" amounts to. What we are *perceptually aware of* are objects, properties, and events that are *present*: past objects, properties, or events *cannot*, strictly speaking, be perceived (Le Poidevin 2007). Perhaps what Stoljar has in mind is a broader sense of "perceiving," something like "being outwardly aware," or maybe just "representing." If so, however, it is unclear what "perceiving the sky's having been blue" amounts to if not just "recalling (or seeming to recall) the blue sky," plus a commitment to a model of (apparent) memory such that (apparent) memory is a mental representation of an event and its pastness. And if "perceiving the sky's having been blue" is just remembering (or seeming to remember) the blue sky, it is unclear what explanatory role it is supposed to play, given that the subject's (apparent) memory of the blue sky is just a datum in the argument. So, Stoljar's perceptual model seems to be either outlandish (if it implies that we can literally *perceive* past objects and events) or unexplanatory (if perceiving past objects or events just amounts to *remembering* or *seeming to remember* them). At the very least, a fuller and more detailed account of the perceptual model would be needed to dispel these worries.⁷

But the most worrying issue is that Stoljar's reconstruction does not do justice to the original and much stronger formulation of the memory argument (which is based on the two intuitive ideas outlined above):

P1. A subject can remember an event E only if she was aware of E when E occurred;

⁷ For a fuller and more developed criticism of Stoljar's "perceptual model," see Giustina (2022).

- P2. Every conscious state is such that there is some later time at which its subject can remember it; therefore,
 C. Every conscious state is such that its subject is aware of it at the time of its occurrence.⁸

This reconstruction is visibly different from Stoljar's. Its premises have nothing to do with *knowledge* about past experiences and its epistemic grounds. Rather, they are simply *facts* about our memory of events and experiences.

The truth of P1 becomes straightforwardly apparent once we distinguish *episodic* from *semantic* memory (Tulving 1972). The former consists in first-person experiential recollection of events of one's personal past, while the latter is third-person memory of facts of the world. Whereas one can certainly have *semantic* memory of facts one was not aware of when they occurred (I remember that French Revolution occurred in 1789, even though I could be aware of nothing in 1789), one can only have *episodic* memory of events one was aware of when they occurred. Naturally, one cannot have first-person experiential recollection of events one was unaware of. So, for example, the police will rely on my memory to reconstruct the dynamics of a car accident only if I *witnessed* the accident—i.e., only if I was somehow *aware of* the accident: they will make no use of my memory if I did not see, hear, or experience the accident in any way. Thus, having *first-personal experience* of an event is a necessary condition for having episodic memory of it at a later time.⁹

The idea underlying P2 is that we can recall not only the external *events* we experience, but also our *experience* of them. When I recall yesterday night's concert, I recall not only the concert (the music, the people, the room's stuffiness, etc.), but also my experience of it: the way the music *sounded* to me, the way people *looked* to me, the way the air *smelled* to me, the *elation* I *felt* when my favorite song was played, etc. Of course, we do not actually recall *all* the experiences we undergo. However, the reason why we do not recall them is *not* that we *cannot* recall them, but simply that we *forgot* them. For any conscious experience is such that it is nomologically possible for its subject to recall it later.¹⁰

This reconstruction is different from, and stronger than, the one proposed by Stoljar—arguably, this is why defenders of IA have used this argument rather than Stoljar's version. Importantly for our present purpose, this argument does not appeal to any “inner awareness model” as opposed to a “knowledge model” or a “perceptual model,” since it is not based on any epistemic consideration about our knowledge of past events, but only on facts about episodic memory.

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⁸ This is how Kriegel (2019: 146) reconstructs it. The other reconstructions are based on similar premises.

⁹ An anonymous referee objected to P1 that, according to some recent empirical research on memory, episodic memories systematically misrepresent the event that originated them (see, e.g., Schacter et al. forthcoming). The idea is that only some salient properties and objects are actually recalled; the rest of the memory experience is the result of the subject's a posteriori “reconstruction of the scene,” formed on the basis of the subject's context, needs, and interests. However, even if all memories were “reconstructions of the scene” in the sense just described, this would not threaten the memory argument. For one thing, what P1 says is that being aware of E is a *necessary* condition for S to episodically recall E—not that it is (also) a *sufficient* condition for S to veridically episodically recall E. So, P1 is compatible with all of S's memories being (partial) misrepresentations. Moreover, as pointed out by the referee, although (some) episodic memories misrepresent the relevant past event, there are at least *some* elements of *some* events (some properties and objects that were salient to the subject at the time of the event's occurrence) that the subject *can* correctly recall. If the subject can recall them, according to P1, the subject must have been aware of them.

¹⁰ For a much more extensive defense of P1 and P2 see Kriegel (2019).

The *argument from attention* is one of those for which Stoljar does not cite any actual proponent. However, if properly formulated, it can indeed constitute a compelling theoretical ground for IA. The underlying intuitive idea is the following. For any conscious experience you undergo, it is possible for you to draw your attention to it (we usually attend to the *objects* of our experiences, but, at any time, we can shift our attention to the *experiences* themselves—as we do when we *introspect*). Now, for any x , you can attend to x only if you are *aware* of x . If you want to be able to attend to x but are not yet aware of x , you will need, first, to do something to *become* aware of x (e.g., *looking* at x). To attend to an experience of yours, however, you just need to shift your attention to it—no other action aimed at making you become aware of the experience is required. Therefore, for any conscious experience you undergo, you are aware of it.

Here is how Stoljar reconstructs the argument (2021: 13):

- P1. If I am in a conscious state C , it is possible for me to attend to my being in C .
- P2. If it is possible to attend to my being in C , I am aware of my being in C .
- C. Ergo, if I am in a conscious state C , I am aware of my being in C .

P1 is antecedently plausible. Although we typically do not attend to our conscious states, all of them are in principle introspectable: they are such that we can draw our (introspective) attention to them. Arguably, P2 falls out of a more general principle: being aware of something is necessary for possibly attending to it. Stoljar’s formulation of P2, however, may be undermined by some experimental results, which seem to speak against that principle: blindsight patients seem to be able to attend to objects in the blind part of their visual field—of which, of course, they are not phenomenally aware (Kentridge, Heywood, and Weiskrantz 1999). To make the argument more plausible, I propose to restrict it to *conscious* attention. Blindsight patients may acquire information about objects they are not visually aware of via *unconscious* attention; although such information may play a role in their reported guesses about the shape and position of objects in the blind part of their visual field, such information is not available to them via any phenomenally conscious visual representation of the relevant object. Information acquired through *conscious* attention, instead, is always available to the subject via a phenomenally conscious representation of the object attended to. Conscious attention, then, implies phenomenal awareness of its object: for one to *consciously* attend to some x , one must be aware of x . This is intuitive: one cannot consciously attend to something one is unaware of. I thus suggest the following more rigorous reconstruction of the argument from attention:¹¹

- P1. If I am in a conscious state C , it is possible for me to *consciously* attend to my being in C .¹²
- P2. If it is possible for me to *consciously* attend to my being in C , I am aware of my being in C .
- C. Ergo, if I am in a conscious state C , I am aware of my being in C .

Stoljar argues that the argument “commits a modal fallacy, for it conflates two readings of ‘it is possible for S to attend to x ’.” On what Stoljar calls the “*weak* reading,” S can attend to x even if S is not aware of x . For example, “I don’t know what’s in my pocket; it is nevertheless possible for me to attend to what’s in my pocket because it is possible for me to come to know what’s in my pocket, and attend to what I know.” On the “*strong* reading, ‘it is possible for S to attend to x ’ presupposes that S is aware of x .” (2021: 14). Stoljar’s objection is that neither reading makes the

¹¹ Although Stoljar works with the previous, unrefined version of the argument, his objection applies to the refined and more charitable version as well.

¹² This formulation of P1 is also straightforwardly true, since introspection does imply conscious attention to the experience.

argument persuasive: on the weak reading P2 is false and on the strong reading P1 begs the question.

Although it is true that there is a sense in which possibility to attend to x does not entail awareness of x , that is, arguably, not the sense at play in the argument for IA. It is indeed nomologically possible for me to attend to the Taj Mahal, but this possibility is conditional on the occurrence of a number of events or actions (my taking a flight to India, etc.), that make it possible for me to become (perceptually) *aware* of the temple. Once I become aware of it, the last action I have to perform is to actually *draw* and *sustain* my attention to the temple. Likewise, it is nomologically possible for Stoljar to attend to what is in his pocket, but this possibility is conditional on his undertaking some actions to become aware of what is in his pocket—say, by *putting his hand* in his pocket and thereby becoming *perceptually aware* of what is in it, or perhaps by *asking* the person who slipped it in his pocket and thereby becoming *cognitively aware* of what is in his pocket.

When it comes to what we currently perceive in our environment and to our own conscious mental states, instead, no further action needs to be undertaken other than just drawing and sustaining attention to x . To attend to a building which is currently in your (phenomenally conscious) visual field, all you need to do is draw your perceptual attention to it. Likewise, to attend to the mild melancholic feeling that has been occupying the fringe of your consciousness for the past hour, while your attention was focused on your work, all you need to do is to shift your introspective attention to it. Arguably, the best explanation of this is that, in these cases, you are *already* (perceptually or introspectively) *aware* of the building and of the melancholic feeling respectively, and the possibility for you to attend to them is conditional on *no* further action or event conducive to your awareness of them.

The notion of attention at play in the argument, then, does imply that for S to possibly attend to x , S must be aware of x . But this does *not* amount to begging the question. That possibility for S to consciously attend to x requires S's *being* or *becoming* aware of x is just a *fact* about conscious attention. Again, for you to consciously attend to the Taj Mahal you need either be *already aware* of it, or else undertake some *actions* (or undergo a series of events) aimed at (or leading to) your *becoming aware* of it. This is because awareness of x is a necessary condition on conscious attention directed to x .¹³

That one does not need to undertake any action (or undergo any event) other than drawing and sustaining attention to a conscious experience of one's for one to consciously attend to it is just another fact about human psychology.

It may be objected that on a Shoemaker-style view of introspection, to consciously attend to one's being in C, one must have attended to the *question* whether one is in C (cf. Shoemaker 1996); if so, then some action *other than drawing and sustaining attention to C* (i.e., attending to the question whether one is in C) is needed for one to consciously attend to C.¹⁴ However, that *every* instance of introspection implies attending to the question whether one is in C seems intuitively

¹³ The argument *would* be question-begging if P1 was "For any conscious state C I am in, I consciously attend to C," since *consciously attending to C* is just a way of being aware of C; such a premise, besides being false, would implicitly state the argument's conclusion. *It being possible for one to consciously attend to C* (which is all it is stated by P1 of the attention argument as I articulate it), instead, is *not* a way of being aware of C. As noted, that for it being possible for one to consciously attend to x requires S's *being* or *becoming* aware of x is just a *fact* about conscious attention. Therefore, P1 of my argument does not implicitly state the conclusion and does not make the argument question-begging.

¹⁴ This objection was raised by an anonymous referee.

false. To be sure, *some* instances of introspection may involve attending to the question whether one is in C. For example, I may ask myself whether I feel angry about the cashier's being unpleasant to me, introspect, detect some anger phenomenology, and conclude that I am indeed mildly angry at the cashier. However, that it is *impossible* to consciously attend to an experience without antecedently attending to such a question seems quite implausible. I can, for example, consciously attend to a conscious pain sensation in my stomach which is part of my current phenomenal field without antecedently asking myself whether I feel a pain sensation in my stomach—just as, in the case of visual perception, I can consciously attend to the building which is currently in my conscious visual field without asking myself whether there is a building in my visual field.

Based on the abovementioned facts and considerations, the attention argument for IA may be refined as follows:

- P1. If I am in a conscious state C, it is possible for me to consciously attend to my being in C, *without undertaking any action (or undergoing any event) other than drawing and sustaining my attention to C.*
- P2. If it is possible for me to consciously attend to my being in C *without undertaking any action (or undergoing any event) other than drawing and sustaining my attention to C*, I am aware of my being in C.
- C. Ergo, if I am in a conscious state C, I am aware of my being in C.

This argument is immune to Stoljar's criticism and does not involve any question-begging notion of attention.

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Stoljar concludes: "In the case of the inner awareness theory of consciousness, we have put repeated questions to nature; we have tried to formulate arguments for its truth. But nature keeps saying no; the arguments are unpersuasive." (2021: 19). However, on the one hand, if arguments are poor, nature will be unlikely to say yes (this is why IA advocates do not ask her via those arguments). On the other hand, as I have tried to show, for at least two of those arguments, much more work needs to be done before sentencing them as unpersuasive. Two arguments are not ten, but, arguably, two solid arguments may be enough to give a philosophical thesis some credibility.

Whether nature says no to inner awareness is still an open question.¹⁵

¹⁵ This paper benefitted from very helpful discussions with Davide Bordini, Arnaud Dewalque, and Uriah Kriegel. I am particularly grateful to Uriah Kriegel for his comments on a previous draft.

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